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Golden Rule Reference: Face-to-Face and Virtual

Chad E. Buckley
Illinois State University, cebuckle@ilstu.edu

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by Chad E. Buckley
Collection Management Coordinator/Science Reference Librarian
Milner Library, Campus Box 8900
Illinois State University
Normal, IL 61790-8900

E-mail: cebuckle@ilstu.edu

Abstract:
Reference service in all types of libraries could be improved if librarians actively adopted
the mindset of the Golden Rule. The Rule is expressed in some form in many world
religions and instructs us to treat others how we would like to be treated. Such an
approach has applicability not only in face-to-face reference transactions, but also in
virtual reference settings. The empathetic reference librarian should be alert to both
verbal and non-verbal clues which can indicate how a patron would like to be treated.

Imagine for a moment that you are a patron approaching a reference desk in a library, or

in this age of virtual 24/7 reference that you are initiating a chat reference session or

sending an e-mail query to a librarian. Just what is it that you expect from this

encounter? Do you hope for just a reasonably correct answer? Or do you also expect that

the librarian will be both helpful and respectful? Do you have other expectations,

perhaps related to the promptness of the librarian's reply or the form that the information

you receive will take? The answers to these unspoken questions in a patron's mind go a

long way toward determining whether they perceive they are receiving good service.

Many attempts have been made over the years to improve reference service. Our

attention has been directed toward the importance of the reference interview, the poor

accuracy rate of answers to reference queries, and concepts such as tiered reference.

Recently, Miller stated that "there is nothing wrong with reference that common sense

and the Golden Rule cannot cure."[1] However, he did not really elaborate on this idea.

Let's ask ourselves now, what exactly would reference service be like if librarians actually

applied the Golden Rule on a day-to-day basis? Perhaps if we can further articulate what

common sense tells us and examine in depth the concept of the Golden Rule, this might

give us an idea of additional ways to improve reference service, both in person and

virtual.

Most of us learned in library school that our behavior has some influence on reference

transactions. We know that interpersonal communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is

very important in the reference encounter. This knowledge, however, does not always

translate into the type of service that patrons expect. As Miller suggested, keeping a

simple principle in the forefront of our minds can help in this regard. It is not so much

that we do not know how to provide good reference service, but that by adopting the

mindset of the Golden Rule, we can more intuitively do so regardless of the

circumstances before us. An honest attempt to apply the Golden Rule in reference

encounters can greatly enhance the quality of service we provide to our patrons and can

be of benefit in any type of library.

Everyone has at one time or another heard the aphorism encouraging one "to put yourself

in someone else's shoes." Such a comment is typically made to promote empathy and is

essentially another way of stating the Golden Rule. The reference desk, whether physical

or virtual, is one setting where application of this saying is particularly apropos since librarianship is essentially a service profession and therefore focused on the needs of patrons. As reference librarians, we may have our own professional and personal goals for a reference encounter, but the patron's needs should remain paramount in our minds.

The Golden Rule basically states "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and is found in some form in many world religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.[2] Wattles sums up the Golden Rule thusly, "What could be easier to grasp intuitively than the golden rule? … I know how I like to be treated; and that is how I am to treat others. The rule asks me to be considerate of others rather than indulging in self-centeredness."[3] The Rule may also be stated in a negative version which urges that you _not_ do to others what you would _not_ like done to you. It does not, as some think, suggest that one "Do unto others _as_ they do unto you." This implies vengeance and retaliation which are antithetical to the true spirit of the Rule. Nor does the Golden Rule implore that we treat others in the manner in which _they_ would like, for we cannot easily know exactly how they would wish to be treated. We do know how we might wish to be treated in a similar situation.

With regard to reference service in libraries, the issue then becomes how would we personally like to be treated in a reference encounter? One can make some generalizations that would likely apply to the majority of encounters with patrons. However, specifics will vary from patron to patron, and our task as reference librarians is to use whatever clues are available to discern the patron's circumstances and then

empathize how we might like to be treated in those particular circumstances, to put ourselves in their shoes as it were.

General behavioral characteristics of effective reference encounters are well summarized in a 1996 RASD document.[4] These guidelines cover much of the generally courteous behavior that is to be expected from reference librarians in a physical reference desk setting and include specific behaviors related to approachability, interest, listening, searching and follow-up. Many of these behaviors could be considered "common sense" as suggested by Miller, and if we would typically expect to be treated in such a manner, we can assume that most other patrons would also.

Picture the following scenario in a library. You, the patron, walk up to a reference desk where a librarian is earnestly working at a computer. You stand and wait for several minutes before the librarian offers to help you. During that time the librarian never even acknowledges your presence by saying they will be with you shortly. Or if the librarian does help you immediately, they are brusque and never smile or make eye contact. Such a librarian is obviously failing to exhibit approachability or to display interest or listening. The RASD Guidelines adequately address most general situations such as these.

These guidelines can also be easily transferred to the virtual reference environment. Just as one should be responsive when a patron approaches a physical reference desk, so the virtual librarian ought to quickly reply to an e-mail query or promptly greet a patron who has begun a chat reference session. Timely assistance remains imperative, just as in face-

to-face reference transactions. We all appreciate not being made to wait any longer than necessary. Another important issue related to the concept of virtual approachability is that whatever chat software a library is using should be accessible to all users, not just those with the latest hardware. Would you as a remote user care if your library were using the best, most up-to-date software if it would not work on your computer? Or would something simpler but less cutting edge be better if it could be used by all patrons without generating great levels of frustration?

Similarly, opportunities for displaying interest, listening, and following up abound in the virtual reference setting. The virtual librarian can repeat questions back to the user to display interest and make sure they are really hearing what the patron is communicating. As with face-to-face reference, one can follow up virtually by asking if the information provided met the patron's need and indicating that the remote user should contact the librarian again if they require additional assistance.

While 24/7 virtual chat reference may seem new and exciting, in many ways it is simply an extension of already existing forms of reference service. The introduction of telephone reference service was probably originally viewed with similar anticipation and apprehension. Users are remote in both situations, although chat technology allows some possibilities not available via the telephone. Librarians may actually push web pages or do a step-by-step demonstration in chat reference, or they may send URL's, specific instructions, or lists of citations via e-mail. Whatever form reference service takes, it still consists of a librarian interacting with a patron whether the two can see one another or

not. And with the increasing availability of webcams in the virtual environment, this barrier may routinely cease to exist as well in virtual reference interactions.

These general common sense guidelines are very important in all reference transactions. In many instances, however, the patron has unique concerns or needs which call for us to transcend the standard behaviors discussed above. The reference librarian should be especially sensitive to spoken or unspoken feedback from the patron. Often there are subtle or obvious clues which can alert us to a patron's particular circumstances. Listen for statements such as:

- "This is the first time I've ever been in this library."

- "I've been here for 3 hours and haven't found a thing!"

- "I looked and this wasn't on the shelf where it should have been."

- "I have a research paper due in two days and just have to have this article!"

- "The librarian at the main library said this branch library was supposed to have the book I need, but I can't find it."

The empathetic librarian should be particularly alert to such clues. If you imagine yourself in the patron's position, you can understand the fear or frustration that lies behind some of these statements. At other times, the patron may not overtly voice such concerns. The savvy librarian must attempt to pick up on nonverbal clues to gain some understanding of where the patron's situation or feelings. This may be particularly difficult in the virtual reference environment where nonverbal cues are absent. Emoticons or all caps may be the only clues to what the remote patron is truly feeling.

Such situations call for an extra dose of empathy and understanding. One should strive to understand what the patron is feeling. They may feel totally lost in the library or they may have severe time constraints, sometimes caused by their own procrastination, sometimes not. You should try not to judge, but instead put yourself in their place and consider what you would like in that situation. Maybe you did procrastinate, but would you really want a lecture from a stern librarian if you had a paper due tomorrow? Or would you welcome a librarian coming alongside you and doing their very best to assist you in your time of need?

Suppose you have never been in a specific library before, and you mention this fact to a librarian. You ask the librarian to direct you to the books on cloning, and they hastily jot down a call number, hand it to you, and cursorily wave their hand to indicate that the books are somewhere over that way. They don't even bother to walk you to the specific section you need. Is this how you personally would like to be treated if you were in totally unfamiliar surroundings and had said so to the librarian? Wouldn't you appreciate the librarian getting up and showing you the specific location of the item for which you are looking?

Or imagine the opposite, where a librarian is too helpful. You only have a few minutes on your lunch break to find the books by Mark Twain, and you mention this to the librarian. The librarian, instead of simply looking up the call number, has you sit down at a computer where they proceed to describe how to search for books by author, title, and subject, and how to find journal articles about Twain's writings. Such an example is

obviously extreme, but it does illustrate how being insensitive to the patron's

circumstances and pursuing one's own agenda as a librarian could negatively impact a

reference encounter.

Extensive reference interviews and one-on-one instruction are obviously not bad or

unimportant, but they are not always appropriate and can be taken to extremes. If the

patron only wants one piece of information, don't try to teach them to use the whole

library. They may only want to be shown where a particular item is located in the library

and would become frustrated if made to sit down and learn all the nuances of searching

the online catalog. Detailed instruction may have to wait for another day. Other patrons

may desire to learn the nuances of how to search a database and use a thesaurus. If the

patron appears receptive and provides positive feedback to your initial suggestion that

you teach them how to conduct their own searches, then that is your green light to

continue. The Golden Rule does not mean that we do a patron's work for them and

abdicate all responsibility for teaching them how to use the library, but it does require that

we be sensitive to their needs and desires at that moment. If they say they have class in

five minutes, then by all means, lead them directly to the item on the shelf as quickly as

possible. It all boils down to being sensitive to a patron's circumstances.

Remote users may also desire specific instruction so that they may replicate a search later

on their own and become independent searchers. The opportunity to teach how to use the

library and search efficiently still exists in the virtual reference setting. The concept of

information literacy is not excluded from the virtual environment, although the

empathetic librarian must still attempt to ascertain how open a remote patron is to this idea.

In the virtual reference environment, the librarian should also keep in mind what they as a patron would like if they were a remote user. Remote users typically do not want to be told to just come into the library for assistance although in some instances this may actually be appropriate or even necessary. Such users often prefer to do all of their work remotely and rely on online information sources such as the web and e-journals. The very fact that they are using a virtual reference service indicates that they were not initially inclined or able to come to the library to do their research. Therefore, the virtual librarian should do all that is in their power to meet the needs of such users remotely. Only when absolutely necessary should they direct remote users to actually come to the library to use better information that is only available in that physical location.

Virtual reference also offers the opportunity to look beyond what the individual reference librarian can do in a single reference transaction and explore new services for the library as a whole. This might include expanded interlibrary loan and document delivery services to meet the special needs of remote users.

Some additional special considerations should be kept in mind regarding the Golden Rule. There are limits to its applicability especially if this involves inherently unethical behavior. The classic example is that of a masochist treating others how they would wish to be treated.[5] Because one likes to have pain inflicted upon oneself, this does not

suggest that it would be right to inflict pain upon another. The Rule assumes that others want the same things we do, which may not always be true. What is implied is a kind of societal average concerning expected treatment. In a library setting, the Rule must also remain subject to federal and state laws as well as library policies. You do not look the other way because you would like a librarian to do so if you were a patron with criminal tendencies. Societal norms and laws still apply. However, if a patron does need reprimanding for a minor infraction of library rules, you should do so in a friendly, respectful manner.

As a professional librarian, you may rarely find yourself in the actual role of library patron standing at a reference desk. It may therefore be helpful to think of times when you have been served by another, perhaps by a store clerk, a server in a restaurant, or a doctor. What factors determined how successful you felt your interaction with that person had been? Thinking back on such situations may help you to picture yourself in the patron's place in a library setting. Just giving the patron the impression that you are trying to be empathetic and on their side can turn a potentially negative situation into a positive one.

So, the next time you're at the reference desk (physical or virtual) and someone approaches you, stop and think. Imagine you are the one on the other side of the desk. How would you like to be treated?

<u>References</u>

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2. H.T.D. Rost, <u>The Golden Rule: A Universal Ethic</u>. (Oxford: George Ronald, 1986).

3. Jeffrey Wattles, <u>The Golden Rule</u>. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3.

4. "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals," RASD, available at http://www.ala.org/rusa/stnd_behavior.html; accessed 2002, October 22.

5. Wattles, 176-7.